

# CONSTRUCTING COMPOSITE NARRATIVES

---

A Step-By-Step Guide for  
Researchers in the Social Sciences

Edited by Olivia Johnston

First published 2024

ISBN: 978-1-032-54313-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-54356-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-42447-5 (ebk)

## Chapter 4

---

### SIX STEPS FOR CONSTRUCTING COMPOSITE NARRATIVES

(CC BY 4.0)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003424475-4

The funder for this chapter is  
Edith Cowan University; Olivia Johnston

# 4

## SIX STEPS FOR CONSTRUCTING COMPOSITE NARRATIVES

So now you may be interested in writing your own composite narratives and you are wondering where you would begin. You can start writing composite narratives as soon as your qualitative data collection and analysis is complete. You will know the answer to your research question(s) and you will have confirmed your findings – you are now ready to disseminate the findings and you and/or your participants have chosen to use composite narratives.

To start, decide upon a main research finding to convey through the composite narrative. Composite narratives are best applied to a clear theme, concept, or category that has been developed through data analysis. This is likely to be called a ‘theme’ in phenomenological research, or a ‘concept’ or ‘category’ of the theory in grounded theory. In this chapter, all of these qualitative abstractions are referred to as ‘main research findings.’ The main research finding is a central aspect of the answer to the research question that you generated from the qualitative data analysis. The main research finding and the process used to generate it can be succinctly and effectively conveyed through a composite narrative.

You will have one or more main research findings to present through composite narratives. Once a main research finding is selected for your first composite narrative, return to the data that were coded to generate the finding. Gather all the data that were abstracted during each stage of coding. This process will be simplified if you used a software program like NVivo, where all data would be sorted in nodes already. Reread the data so that you remember exactly how the finding was developed. The composite narrative will reflect the process that you used to generate the finding.

Now you are ready to start putting together the composite narrative. Here is a six-step process you can follow to develop a composite narrative:

- Step 1: Develop a narrative thread (a storyline) for the first half of the narrative.** The narrative thread is the storyline, or the plot, of the story. The rest of the story will be built around the core that you select as the narrative thread. When selecting the narrative thread, choose a rich piece of data that has a lot of description and elaboration. You are looking for something that will allow you to build context and story – a thread that can weave the rest of the composite narrative together.
- Step 2: Build the first half of the narrative** using quotes from other participants. Go back to the data and select quotes that complement the narrative thread to communicate the main finding.
- Step 3: Develop a narrative thread for the second half of the narrative.** Using the same process as in step 1, focus on the negative cases that illustrate another facet(s) of the main research finding being conveyed through the narrative.
- Step 4: Build the second half of the narrative** using quotes from other participants.
- Step 5: Edit and structure the narrative.** Add an introductory and concluding paragraph that emphasises the main research finding being conveyed.
- Step 6: Assigning a meaningful title.** Choose a title that signposts the main research finding being conveyed by the narrative. Where possible, use a word or phrase uttered by a participant that captures the essence of the main finding.

This overview of the six steps can be elaborated through an example, which follows in the next section.

### **An example of how to construct a composite narrative**

The context of the following example of how to construct a composite narrative is from a study about education. The narrative is called '*My socks don't matter today*,' and it was written to convey a finding from research that used reflections on critical interactions between students and teachers as data. The 15-year-old students that participated were observed interacting with various teachers throughout their school day, then interviewed about those interactions. More than 175 classroom observations and 100 interviews were conducted in the study. The research used grounded theory methods to generate new substantive theory about how students experience their teachers' expectations of them.

The narrative that is used as an example in this section presents the main research finding '*that students experience teachers as having high expectations*

when teachers seek to understand more than students as ‘students,’ but as people with whole lives.’ The finding was developed from data where students emphasised that their best teachers knew them well and were interested in their lives outside of school, not just their adherence to school rules. The students explained that by seeking to know them better, their teachers brought out their best. They experienced increased motivation and improved academic results when teachers sought to develop positive relationships with them. The narrative below reflects the data indicators that were used to generate this research finding, while also exemplifying the process for constructing a narrative.

**STEP 1: Develop a narrative thread (a storyline) for the first half of the narrative**

To prepare for constructing the narrative, all of the data that was coded to generate the research finding was compiled in one document for easy reference. In this case, this meant all of the data stored in NVivo with the codes ‘checking in’ and ‘knowledge of students’ attached to it. The data then were re-read several times for familiarisation. While rereading the data, the narrative thread was identified as the richest and most detailed data indicator of the main finding being conveyed by the interview.

In this example narrative, an interaction between the participant ‘Nadia’ (N) and her teacher reflected the importance of teachers’ expressing genuine concern for their students. Nadia had explained an example of an interaction where she experienced high expectations when her teacher showed care. The exchange Nadia is describing in the raw data below was also observed by me, the researcher (O), earlier that day. The use of italics indicates the words used for the narrative thread, with bracketed numbers indicating the sequence of the quotes used in the construction of the narrative thread.

**BOX 4.1 SELECTING RAW DATA FOR THE NARRATIVE THREAD**

O – in the first half you seemed more interested in just playing on your phone, but towards the end something changed a bit – am I right?

N – Yeah. Because (3) *the first half of it was just reading the book, which is, I already am, like I know all the Harry Potter, I’ve read it all, I’ve seen all the movies, like I’m the biggest nerd on Harry Potter, so that’s why when it came to actually doing work, I was like okay, I’ll get it down. And (9) because I could tell the teacher was getting pissy with me, and I was like, I like that teacher, she taught at (old school) as well, and so I’m like, okay, I’m not going to be mean to her, I like her. (8) She never gets angry at me because she knows that I like, the fact that (10) she came over and she spoke to me. And she was like – ‘is there*

*a reason that you're not doing your work?' and THAT'S WHAT I REALLY LIKE! I REALLY LIKE THAT! So I was like, 'naw I'm just really tired, and I've seen the movie and I've read the book, so ... I know this bit.' And she was like 'okay, we'll take some notes soon.' And she knows that I really like taking notes and making everything look pretty.*

O – Okay, cool. So she kind of gave you a break there, and checked in with you. And I heard her say a few times, like not to be on your phone. How did you respond to that?

N – Uh, most of the time (5) *I just kind of hid my phone.* And, (6) *because I was talking to my friend who was not at school today on the phone as well*

O – yeah! I heard you talking on the phone a couple of times!

N – yeah, (4) *he was like, video calling me in class.* And he's like my best friend, my absolute best friend, he's honestly like my brother. And um, because (7) *I haven't seen him in a few days* and he was just like making me laugh and I was like 'okay, stop! I need to do my work.' But as soon as we started taking the notes I like hung up and was like – I got to go now.

O – (you were also) playing some fish game?

N – It's SUCH a good (2) *game. It's on Facebook. It's SO addictive.* I'm like on Level 6, it's so good. Um – yeah so I kind of like I could tell, because she knows me, she knows me from (old school) so she knows exactly what I'm like. And so if there's something, when she knows I'm not paying attention then she'll pick on me, like do you know the answer to this one?

The extract in Box 4.1 is from an interview transcript that includes Nadia's description of an interaction with her teacher that she had experienced as significant. As the researcher, I had also witnessed the interaction during the classroom observations that day, so I was able to probe Nadia further in the interview. Nadia knew that I had been present in the class during this interaction, too. During the observation, I had noted that Nadia spent most of the lesson interacting with friends and playing a game on her phone. Then, in the second half of the lesson, something had shifted and she became engaged in learning. In this data from our interview, Nadia is describing an interaction with her teacher that communicated high expectations and led to her changing her behaviour. The numbers with the italicised text were added to illustrate how the specific quotes were selected and sequenced to develop the composite narrative so that Step 2 could be completed.

The quotes selected from the raw data were then sequenced into a clear storyline in Box 4.2 below. Each of the italicised phrases below are taken directly from the raw data in Box 4.1 above.

### **BOX 4.2 ARRANGING THE RAW DATA INTO A NARRATIVE THREAD**

*I played a Facebook game on my phone for the first half of class. It's SO addictive. We were supposed to be reading our books. I know it all already – I've already read that book and seen the movie. My best friend was also video calling me and making me laugh. The teacher asked me several times not to be on my phone. I just kind of hid my phone and kept talking to my friend. He wasn't at school today and I haven't seen him in a few days. That teacher never gets angry, but I could tell she was getting pissy with me. She came over and spoke to me, asking 'Is there a reason that you're not doing your work?' That's what I really like – she checked in on me by coming over, crouching down, and talking with me. I told her I was tired and I already knew the bit she was teaching anyway. She was like, 'Okay, we'll take some notes soon.' She knows that I really like taking notes.*

As indicated by the use of italics, the story is being told in the words of Nadia. The narrative thread is constructed by arranging Nadia's words to form a clear storyline that indicates the main finding *'that students experience teachers as having high expectations when teachers seek to understand more than students as 'students,' but as people with whole lives.'* Only a few words and phrases were added when necessary for the flow of the storyline.

The selection of a rich data indicator to develop a storyline is crucial because it allows the narrative to have a sense of character and participant voice. This relies on the collection of rich and descriptive data in the first place, which is a key element of effective qualitative research. A rich data indicator allows a narrative thread that employs the host of storytelling techniques. In the example in Box 4.2, narrative devices including the class setting, the context of the phone use, and the back story of how Nadia was feeling that day allow the reader to be drawn into what is happening to the participant and relate to her experience.

#### **STEP 2: Build the first half of the narrative**

In this second step, Nadia's story is supplemented with quotes from three other participants. This is why the narratives are called 'composite' – because they use the words from the interviews with more than one participant. They are a composite of different data indicators from different interview transcripts. Now, the words of other participants are weaved through Nadia's own to add further richness to the narrative thread. The single narrative voice is preserved to maintain the capacity of the narrative to resonate with readers through Nadia's voice and context.

A list of other data indicators that contributed to the generation of the main research finding was made. The following three examples from other participant interviews were used to add to the storyline from Nadia:

#### **BOX 4.3 QUOTES TO ADD TO THE NARRATIVE THREAD**

- 1 ‘and normally they will know when I’m having a bad day so they will know when to just kind of like, not, .....’ (ST)
- 2 ‘I think she just looks at people who are either struggling or looking upset or just not doing the work, she says like are you okay, seeing what is going on.’ (JH)
- 3 – ‘...and I noticed she came and sat with you at the start of class H – Yeah she was just asking if I was okay, and I told her I was tired.’ (HM)

These quotes were then added to Nadia’s storyline, with the numbers added to reflecting which of the three data indicators in Box 4.3 were added. In some cases, repetition between data indicators is reflected through multiple numbers. The process is presented in Box 4.4:

#### **BOX 4.4 BUILDING THE FIRST HALF OF THE NARRATIVE**

My English (2) (3) teacher asks me if I am okay if I’m (2) not doing my work. I played a Facebook game on my phone for the first half of class. It’s SO addictive. We were supposed to be reading our books. I know it all already – I’ve already read that book and seen the movie. My best friend was also video calling me and making me laugh. The teacher asked me several times not to be on my phone. I just kind of hid my phone and kept talking to my friend. He wasn’t at school today and I haven’t seen him in a few days. That teacher never gets angry, but I could tell she was getting pissy with me. She came over and spoke to me, asking ‘Is there a reason that you’re not doing your work?’ That’s what I really like – she checked in on me by coming over, crouching down, and talking with me. I told her I was tired and I already knew the bit she was teaching anyway. She was like, ‘Okay, we’ll take some notes soon.’ She knows that I really like taking notes. That teacher (1) knows when I am having a bad day. (2) She comes and sits with me to (3) see what’s going on.

Using this process, the words that were uttered by the participants were preserved. Only the occasional word (indicated by lack of italics above) was added by the researcher. Just like with the construction of the narrative thread, additional words are only used where necessary to connect the data and create flow.

The verb tense used by the students is also preserved, with additions to Nadia's past tense story making general reflections that use present tense. The next step was to an additional storyline from in the data to contrast with Nadia's story.

**STEP 3: Develop a narrative thread for the second half of the narrative**

The second half of the narrative can serve as a foil – a reflective emphasis for the first half. In a composite narrative, the narrative foil can highlight the main research finding by contrasting it with a negative iteration from the data. Most qualitative research findings include negative cases in the data – reverse situations where an *absence* confirms the validity of the main finding. For example, a main finding about the experience of belonging could include data about being left out, or a main finding about pride could also include data about envy. Once data are synthesised, researchers will often find these reverse truths that confirm the validity of the main finding.

In the case of the main finding represented in the example in this chapter, an absence of teacher care is the contrast for the care shown by Nadia's teacher in the first narrative thread. The first narrative thread illustrates a teacher who showed care by seeking to understand Nadia, and the second half will emphasise this finding by exemplifying a teacher who doesn't seem to care about her student. The same process for developing the narrative thread used for the first half of the narrative is used to develop the contrasting second half. The second half draws from data taken from an interview with 'Rochelle,' who experienced low expectations when her teacher seemed to care more about whether she was complying with school rules (like what socks to wear) than about *her*. An extract of data from an interview with Rochelle was chosen as the second narrative thread:

**BOX 4.5 SELECTING RAW DATA FOR THE SECOND NARRATIVE THREAD**

R – Those (1) *teachers care more about if we are wearing the right socks than your mental health, like if you're having a bad day...*

...R – yeah she'll come over and she'll be like, R, are you okay? And I'll be like 'yep'.

**O – So you just say yes, even though you don't understand.**

R – yeah I'll be like 'yeah!' But if I feel like oh actually maybe I could do this, miss could you just explain this again. But if (2) *I totally don't get it* (7) *I'll just be like 'yeah I'm good!'* (laughs) ... writing it down...

Ummmm – yeah it's like I can't be ... like, yeah so ... if I'm, if she says oh yeah are you okay Rachel, I'll be like 'yeah', because (8) *I can't be bothered for her to like sit down, and do it with me ...* and yeah



R – because sometimes (5) *I feel like I should know it*, so I'll just be like – yeah I know it with the teacher I have to be like, yeah I know that. (10) *I remember when you taught me that*. I don't have to be like a 'student' – like (9) *she's taught it and she expected us to know it*. But *I like didn't fully learn it yet*.

**O – So you miss something, or didn't get it the first time, but**

R – But I'll just say yes when she walks around, because I know that she's already taught it, so. Say yep.

**O – I noticed the other day when you were doing revision that you did actually show it to her, I think you asked her if you did it right?**

R – oh yeah, I remember that. So I did do the question right, like it was all right, but it was written down just out of order and stuff and didn't know what I did right, (4) because you have to find the lowest common factor, and I just did any one but not the lowest one.

**O – So you felt like you could show her that work that you had done, to check it.**

R – yeah because I actually put the effort into doing it. So I feel like, I'm like 'miss! Look at all the work that I did!'

*Observation notes from 18-11-18 indicate that this lesson was reviewing factorising, and the teacher was circulating the class and sitting with students to re-teach them if they didn't remember or didn't understand*

The interview transcript extract in Box 4.5 shows rich data from Rochelle that contrasts with Nadia's experience. Rochelle described this interaction with her Maths teacher at the end of that day in the interview to explain how she experienced teachers with low expectations of her. She used the example above of avoiding her Maths teacher's attention because she didn't want the kind of attention that the teacher was offering. She was having a bad day and did not have a good relationship with this teacher, so she did not feel motivated to understand the Maths content. Her teacher sought to interact with her about her schoolwork and Rochelle was not interested in engaging, so she lied to her teacher and pretended she knew how to do the work so that she would be left alone. This contrasts with Nadia's experience, where her teacher sought to connect with her and showed care for her as a person, which motivated Nadia to re-engage with her schoolwork in that class.

As was the case when building the first narrative thread, the quotes selected from the raw data from Rochelle are used to build a second narrative thread. The first-person point of view is retained to capture Rochelle's voice, with only the occasional word added to develop the context or flow of the story. The process is exemplified in Box 4.6:

#### **BOX 4.6 ARRANGING THE RAW DATA INTO THE SECOND NARRATIVE THREAD**

*In Maths, my teacher seems to care more about if we are wearing the correct socks than about our mental health. we were reviewing how to factorise for our exam. I totally didn't get it. The teacher came over and asked me, 'Rochelle, are you okay?' She wanted to know if I was understanding how to find the lowest common factor, and I felt like I should know how to do it. I told her, 'Yeah, I'm good!' so she won't sit down and try to do it with me. She had taught it already and expected us to know it. I'd rather (9) her think that I remember what she taught me. I don't tell her that (10) I haven't fully learned it yet.*

#### **STEP 4: Build the second half of the narrative**

To develop the second half of the narrative further, all negative cases of the main finding were listed to add detail using other participants' words. A further five participant's quotes were used to build on the narrative thread:

#### **BOX 4.7 QUOTES TO ADD TO THE SECOND NARRATIVE THREAD**

- 1 'And then my English teacher, *kind of doesn't really because she kind of doesn't have enough time*, so she just generalises across everyone' (AHL)
- 2 'Yeah, he came over and sat with Mia and was like 'are you guys going to do this booklet today' (JH)  
 '.. and they were like Yeah – okay (not motivated sounding) ... I think that coming across like that is not going to help the students at all. Like that's NOT the way to approach them. You want to ask them, – kind of like – because I know that obviously being taught in teaching and being taught in *mental health* is a different thing, but I think like *being a teacher you should kind of look for why a kid is not doing their work, like, what is making them freak out, whether it's something is going on at home or whether its they genuinely can't do it and they need your help. I think teachers need to be more aware of why aren't they doing their work.* And I think like Mr P doesn't have that at all .....!' (JH)
- 3 'I'm always like, ohhh – I try and just walk in and try to avoid the whole situation of sorry miss.' (OD)
- 4 'I don't have to be like a 'student'' (N)
- 5 'Yeah because *I know she's like very disappointed.* I'm like walk in – didn't happen!' (J)

These quotes shown in Box 4.7 above were added the Rochelle's storyline to build the second half of the narrative. Box 4.8 illustrates the compilation of the process in the second half of the narrative:

#### **BOX 4.8 BUILDING THE SECOND HALF OF THE NARRATIVE**

In Maths, my teacher seems to care more about if we are wearing the correct student socks than about our mental health. She's not worried about whether or not we are having a bad day, (1) she doesn't have enough time. Today, she was trying to get us to remember how to factorise, for our exam. I totally didn't get it. The teacher came over and asked me, 'Rochelle, are you okay?' She wanted to know if I was understanding how to find the lowest common factor, and I felt like I should know how to do it. I told her, 'Yeah, I'm good!' so she won't sit down and try to do it with me. She had taught it already and expected us to know it. I'd rather her think that I remember what she taught me. I don't tell her that (10) I haven't fully learned it yet. (5) I know she would be disappointed in me, (4) like as a student. (2) Being a teacher you should kind of look for why a kid is not doing their work, like, what is making them freak out. Is it because something is going on at home? Or is there a problem with their mental health? I think teachers need to be more aware of why students aren't doing their work.

Now steps 1–4 have been exemplified, creating two paragraphs using quotes from participants to illustrate the main research finding in its positive and negative iterations. The paragraphs use the words of the participants and weave their experiences together using a narrative thread. In the next step, the paragraphs are put together so that a singular first-person voice tells their stories together as a composite. A few final touches to the story are added to complete the composite narrative and emphasise the main finding in steps 5 and 6.

#### **STEP 5: Edit and structure the narrative**

In this step, the two paragraphs are put together into one narrative. They are then adjusted to make any changes necessary so that the story flows well, adding a short introduction and conclusion that emphasises the main research finding being illustrated by the narrative. Adding the introduction and conclusion emphasises the interpretation of the data and will help ensure that readers ascertain the intended message of the composite narrative.

The two paragraphs can be ordered whichever way illustrates the meaning better. In the example narrative 'My socks don't matter today,' the negative example is placed before the positive example. You can decide which way to place the two contrasting halves of the story during the editing process.

Throughout the fifth step of editing and structuring the narrative, the participants' words are used as much as possible. This includes when writing the introduction and conclusion paragraphs, too. In this example narrative, the last few sentences of the negative half were cut out and separated into an introduction paragraph. The phrase 'teachers with high expectations' was added to reflect the interview question that the researcher asked to prompt these words from the students. The conclusion paragraph uses more of the participants' words to highlight the main finding that the narrative is representing: *that students experience teachers as having high expectations when teachers seek to understand more than students as 'students,' but as people with whole lives.*

#### **BOX 4.9 ADDING AN INTRODUCTION, CONCLUSION, AND TITLE**

##### **'My Socks don't Matter Today'**

Teachers with high expectations seek to understand what is really going on with their students. They look for why a kid is not doing their work and ask questions like, 'Is it because they have something going on at home?' or 'Is there a problem with their mental health?'

In Maths, my teacher seems to care more about if we are wearing the correct student socks than about what kind of day we are having. I felt really tired today because my mind was racing after the river cruise, but that doesn't matter to her. She doesn't have enough time. Today, she was trying to get us to remember how to factorise equations, for our exam. I totally didn't get it. The teacher came over and asked me, 'Rochelle, are you okay?' She meant the Maths problems, am I okay finding the lowest common factor. I felt like I should know how to do it. I told her, 'Yeah, I'm good!' so she wouldn't sit down and try to do it with me. She had taught it already and expected me to know it. I'd rather her think that I remember what she taught me. I didn't tell her that I hadn't fully learned it. She doesn't care about why I'm not doing the work and I know she would be disappointed in me as a student.

Other teachers see more than just a student in me. My English teacher, for example, asks me if I am okay when I'm not doing my work. I was so tired from last night that in class, I just zoned out and played a Facebook game on my phone. It's SO addictive. I knew that we were supposed to be working, but I've already read that book and seen the movie – I know it all already. Meanwhile, my best friend kept video calling me and making me laugh. The teacher asked me several times not to be on my phone. I just kind of hid my phone and kept talking to my friend or playing my game. That teacher never gets angry, but I could tell she was getting pissy with me. She came over and spoke to me,

asking ‘Is there a reason that you’re not doing your work?’ *That’s what I really like* – she was checking in on me. She came over, crouched down, and spoke with me. I explained that I was tired and I already knew the bit she was teaching anyway. She was like, ‘Okay, we’ll take some notes soon.’ She knows that I really like taking notes. That teacher knows when I am having a bad day. She comes and sits with me to see what’s going on.

My English teacher knows more about what is *really* going on with me than my Maths teacher. I know it’s not really their jobs to support students’ mental health and they are really busy trying to get us to learn. However, it makes a difference when they try to see beyond our ‘student’ selves.

### **STEP 6: Assign a meaningful title**

A variety of literary devices can be used to assign a title to a narrative. It is best to use the participants’ words by selecting an extract from the data that were used to generate the main finding. Find some words that represent the finding well. Rochelle’s words about teachers who ‘care more about socks than students’ (see Box 4.5) illustrated how the children perceived high expectations when teachers cared about *them* more than their compliance with school rules. Thus, Rochelle’s metaphor was adapted as the title for this narrative.

Symbolic language such as metaphors that capture an element of the storyline work well. Further examples in subsequent chapters of metaphors adapted to reinforce the meaning conveyed by the composite narrative include in ‘A model city,’ (p. 60) which follows in Chapter 8. Another simple way of assigning a meaningful title is to paraphrase the main finding being represented. This technique is illustrated in the further examples of narratives that follow in the last section of this book, for example with the title ‘Designing my own future’ (p. 41).

In summary, the six steps set out and exemplified in this chapter can be followed to create composite narratives that convey main research findings. Other methods for constructing composite narratives have been used by other researchers in the social sciences, too. Alternative methods will be over-viewed in Chapter 6. However, the six-step method presented in this chapter is the only comprehensive instructional guide to constructing composite narratives that can be replicated to reflect research rigor.

This chapter has presented the process of construction, while the next chapter presents the process of deconstruction through audit trails. Evidence of rigor is conveyed through composite narratives that can be deconstructed

### **32** Six steps for constructing composite narratives

whereby all steps used to create them are made available to readers. Keeping audit trails of narrative construction is necessary so that readers understand the high standard of qualitative research being presented through the narratives. Sharing audit trails with readers further allows them to ascertain and critique the high standard of data analysis and synthesis being conveyed through the composite narrative form.